

## REMARKS BY MICHAEL MARKS

### 12<sup>TH</sup> Annual MLK ECUMENICAL AND MULTICULTURAL PRAYER BREAKFAST

University of Southern Mississippi, Thad Cochran Center

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### *“Our Chance....Our Choice”*

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Good morning to all of you and let me express my profound appreciation to Dean Holloway and the men of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity here at Southern Miss for allowing me to address their Annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Ecumenical and Multicultural Prayer Breakfast here in the beautiful Thad Cochran Center. Anyone who knows me knows that the arts are very near and dear to my heart. The choice to include these performers on this program—vocal, instrumental, spoken and dance – proves that there is still beauty left in the world.

It is good to be back at my alma mater. Bless my mom’s 97-year old heart. She often said that school interfered with my education. Dr. Bennett, I believe when I left the university in 1977, I owed \$2000 in parking fees. My 1966 Buick, that would seat four people on the front seat comfortably, for some reason followed me to class every day. Now, I never parked in the handicapped spaces but I am sure that there is more than one faculty or staff member that still berates my parking habits. Imagine my surprise when Lumberton High school hired me and actually needed a copy of my transcript. When I called Student Services to get my transcript, the University was very helpful. They asked, “How would you like to pay this \$2000 – cash, check or credit card?” So thank you, Dr. Bennett, for all that the University does in the arena of lifelong learning in our community! Somebody said that I had a special parking place reserved for the event this

morning and in fact, thought I was not here because it was still empty. I assure you that had I known that I had special parking privileges today, I would have gotten here early to take a photo of the parking place.

When she was in the fourth grade, my niece was asked to write a term paper about some famous person that she admired. Now in the fourth grade – it wasn't really a term paper because it was done on computer and "famous" has a whole other meaning for elementary school students. So, while class mates wrote about The Incredible Hulk, Pokemon, the Boy Band One Direction and Britney Spears, little Crystal Marks, in typical Marks fashion, took the road less travelled. She wrote about Socrates. She wrote three sentence sand three sentences only. The first sentence read: Socrates was a great philosopher. The second sentence: He talked a lot. Third sentence: They poisoned him. So taking a cue from her academic musings, I will endeavor to say something this morning that is worthwhile and yet be mindful of the hour. I will try to remember that brevity is still appreciated, even at breakfast!

The world is changing. Everywhere we look it seems as if nothing is how it was. Celebrities, Congressmen and CEO's, alike, have been forced to step down because of sexual harassment in past lives. The state of Hawaii is still reeling from this weekend's notice that there was an incoming missile speeding toward them and not to be confused – that this was not a test. Robert Mueller's investigation continues into Russia's online meddling in the last election and introducing his own brand of foreign policy President Trump challenges North Korea's Kim Jung Un as to who has the bigger nuclear button. Yes, the world is changing. But what an opportunity we have this morning to address those changes. This program's theme, "Our Chance, Our Choice," is particular poignant in the middle of the political and social unrest that has gripped our country and shows signs of seeping into the rest of the world.

I am reminded of the speech King delivered just hours before his assassination in Memphis. He was speaking about the needed resolve in light of the sanctions against marches/assemblies. He explained that "We had a choice but that just as we didn't let their hoses and dogs turn us around, we weren't going to let any

injunction turn us around because somewhere he had read of the freedom of assembly,  
somewhere he had read of the freedom of press,  
somewhere he had read of the freedom of speech,  
somewhere he had read that the greatness of America is in our right to protest for right.

Dr. King went on to say, “Well I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter with me now because I’ve been to the mountaintop. I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And he’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know that we as a people will get to the Promised Land. So I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

Martin Luther king understood that he had a chance to right many of the world’s social ills and he made a distinct choice to become involved and that this would be his life’s work and calling.

A few years ago, as an executive officer of The 3 million-member National Education Association, I had the chance to attend the groundbreaking ceremony for the memorial to Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., which was to be built on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The weather was cold, a lot like today’s weather – and I did not have a private parking place. I had to walk quite a distance to get to the ceremony and it was a little wet. But nothing could have dampened the spirits of the thousands who turned out for this historic occasion, a tribute to the work of this great man.

I was just a few hundred feet from the Lincoln memorial, where Dr. King in 1963 delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech – which is rightly regarded as one of the greatest speeches of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. More than 200,000 people gathered on the

mall to hear Dr. King that day; but he was speaking to the entire nation when he said, “We have come to cash a check ... we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt.” When Dr. King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, it had been 100 years since president Lincoln signed the Emancipation proclamation. But as you might guess, a century later, there was still much work to do. There were still chances to improve our common lot and to improve our lives and our liberty. That was true in 1963 and, Boy, is it ever true today in 2018.

We have come a long way – but we still have far to go before we reach the top of the mountain. The dream has not yet been realized. Many said that when we elected the nation’s first African-American President, that we had arrived. Nothing could be further from the truth.

There were many great speakers at the groundbreaking for Dr. King’s memorial that week – including three of his four children, Oprah Winfrey, and Maya Angelou. One of the most inspiring speakers was the junior senator from Illinois, Senator Barack Obama, who said, “The greatest way that we can honor Dr. King’s legacy is to carry on his work. Each generation,” said then-Senator Obama, “Is beckoned anew.” Each generation has a chance to contribute and to write its own history.

Former President Clinton reminded us that while we will forever face the challenges, “The time is always right to do right.” And so this morning, we are beckoned anew. The time is still right to do right. There is so much that we can do to keep the dream alive. Unfortunately, our chances to work in this regard are plentiful. Our nation was founded on great principles of equality and freedom. We set the bar high – and then, throughout our history, we struggled to live up to those promises.

Even today, the contributions of Haitians, Salvadorans, and the entire African Continent, which comprises one fourth of the world’s population is being denied its chance at honor and a credible existence. Even today, the promise that we made to Dreamers, children who were brought here against their will and yet contribute mightily to our economy and America’s bottom line – that promise is being broken. So let’s turn from our talk of chances to the opportunity that sound

choices will bring. Dr. William Glasser, in his book *Parenting Without Stress*, promulgates the notion of this definition of choice. He says, "The only person whose behavior we can control is our own." And as true as that statement is, I am not foolish enough to believe that we make choices in isolation of others, for the choices we make will ultimately impact the lives of those around us. For me, career choice came early in life. I can remember the very night that I decided to contribute to public service by way of America's classrooms. I remember distinctly the series of events that led to my becoming a teacher.

One Friday night, my mother asked me if I'd like to go to McComb's old Burgland High School to see a Senior Class play. Not having much of a social life at 12, I decided to go. My life was changed forever. I remember seeing the actors in costume, moving around the stage with lines memorized, the artistry of the sets and the lighting – and I thought, how cool would it be to do this for a living? But more than the trappings of high school theatre, I was more impressed with the hero of the play.

All he wanted to do was to make a name for himself and provide for his wife and little boy, just like any other caring American father. His family didn't have much, but what they did have, his father before him had worked a lifetime to obtain. But when Walter finally got his chance, real work was not a choice. Instead, he secretly used the \$10,000 in welfare benefits that his mother received to make a business investment. Unfortunately, his trusted friend and business partner had other plans, and literally took the money and ran, shattering Walter's dream.

When Lorraine Hansberry created this character that we now know as Walter Lee Younger in her stellar play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, she embodied a characteristic of American society that is still present today. It's our increasing unwillingness to work, or like Dr. King – even suffer in order to make individual progress. As a result, we lose touch with what is really important to us. Today, we are all beckoned anew. My choice was to help others live the dream by teaching. Your choice might be to help others face challenges by working in healthcare, government/elected official or via entrepreneurship. Dr. King, by making the

choice to knock down many of the legal barriers, has led the way but other obstacles remain.

It isn't enough to say that every child in America is free to dream his or her own dream. We must give them the opportunity and the tools to realize those dreams. As a 30-year retired educator, I would be remiss if I didn't say that any choice must include education and hands-on application and training. For many of us, education is the only way out. I respect the right of every parent to send your child to the school of your choice. That is your child. But you owe a societal debt to help maintain quality public schools. Many of our kids are being educated in schools that are "tore up, from the floor up!" Don't get me started. You know what naysayers tell us. They believe that we are producing a generation of derelicts – children who read without comprehension; arithmetize without competence and kill without conscience. For too many of our young people, that analysis is chillingly true. We know the statistics. Every 26 seconds a child runs away from home and every 7 minutes a teenager has a baby.

Yes, the choices we make are sometimes bad but we can still learn from our mistakes. The door to lifelong learning is never closed. Today, however, there are some who would slam that door shut. This is your chance and your choice.

1. It is your chance/choice to stand up for justice system reform in our country, to fix a system that disadvantages the poor and minorities. One out of four African American males is in our justice system. In fact, there are most African America males in jail than there are in our colleges and universities.
2. It is your chance/choice to voice your displeasure with the shameful saga of how we have treated Americans who live in Puerto Rico, where these U.S. citizens are still suffering without electricity and water following the devastation of Hurricane Maria. Come on, we are a county who found Bin Laden, in the middle of a desert at 3 am in the morning and watched his capture live via satellite back in the United States. You're telling me that this same country can't figure out how to drop water in Puerto Rico?

3. It is your chance/choice to fix a broken immigration system. Be careful when you hear someone offer that a merit-based immigration system might be best for the U.S. I am all for immigration reform but, really, you can't come here without a Ph.D.? I don't understand. If I have a Ph.D. in hand, why do I need to come to America to study in some of the world's best universities? The late Carl Sagan said this about education, "Frederick Douglass taught that literacy is the path from slavery to freedom. There are many kinds of slavery and many kinds of freedom. But education is still the path." I agree; but do you ever wonder why it was against the law to teach slaves to read?

The Bible tells us to let him, who is without sin, cast the first stone. Never one to cast aspersions on or disrespect the leadership of our great country, I do ponder one point. If a Ph.D. and the ability to read were requirements to get into our country, would the current occupants at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, immigrants themselves, have been turned around at the border? I am all for border security but don't you know for every 15 foot high wall that you build, somebody's is building a 16 foot ladder?! The Psalmist Maya Angelou wrote, "When people show you who they are – believe them."

Ain't nobody swimming the Rio Grande to take jobs away from anybody in this room. Who here wants to pick cotton, harvest watermelons, climb apple trees. Now there's no shame in the game, these are honest jobs and manual labor has to be a part of a diversified economy. Dr. Bennett, when I came to Southern Miss as an Honors College Freshman in 1974, my daddy assured me that I would have a secure summer job – picking cucumbers back home in Magnolia, Mississippi. To make a long story short, I never went home, went to school round the clock and graduated in three years! My dad was the first black county agent in the State of Mississippi and I remember as a youngster, watching a cross being burned on our front yard because of that distinction. My dad always said, "Those were the good old days but I'll be damned if I'll go back to them."

Martin Luther King made a conscious choice to fight the ravages of the Era we called Jim Crow. For many of us, our present situation can only be described as

the era of Jim Crow, Jr. For many of us, our choice, then, is singular: We must work to ensure that we continue to enjoy the blessings of life and liberty. We must run like the lion and the gazelle. Ever heard that African proverb? Every morning in Africa a gazelle wakes up and knows that it must run faster than the fastest lion or it will be killed. Every morning in Africa a lion wakes up and knows that it must run faster than the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death. And so this morning, it doesn't matter whether you are a lion or a gazelle, when the sun comes up, your choice better be to start running.

We really have no choice about running. We live in a nation where small children suffer from hunger quite legally. We live in a nation where toddlers and school children die from guns that are sold quite legally. We live in a nation that continues to let the rich get richer at the expense of the poor quite legally. We live in a nation that believes that real security lies more in missile than in mothers and in bombs rather than in babies. And we live in a state that sometimes does not give sufficient thanks for its daily bread.

My prayer for all of us, following the beautiful litany of prayers already offered this morning, is that unlike Walter Lee Younger, we will never confuse choices that are quite legal with choices that are just and right.

I am a debate coach, and I understand that there are two sides to every coin so please don't let me leave you with the impression that all is lost. There is much to be proud of in this country and I firmly believe that our founding precepts will hold in the end. What started with the march in Selma across the Edmund Pettus Bridge will continue. There is still time to steal away. There is still a bridge over Troubled Water. I look at the beautiful tapestry of people in this room, what a rainbow of beliefs and dispositions you represent. Our families might have come to America on different ships, but looks like we're all in the same boat now.

The world is most assuredly changing but I remain optimistic that things will change for the better.

1. I am encouraged when Republican Senator Lindsay Graham makes a choice of country over party, when he dismisses fake news du jour and

simultaneously confirms that those vulgarities were uttered in the Oval Office.

2. I am emboldened when I witness the courageous choice of women who step forward to say, "Me too."
3. I am elated when I learn that in spite of our country withdrawing from the Paris Environmental Accords, cities and mayors all over this nation are renewing their personal goals to reduce greenhouse gases put in our atmosphere by humans. Three hurricanes in three weeks. Snow in Hattiesburg three times in one year. Let there be no doubt, global warming is real.
4. I am awed at the life and legacy of Peggy Jean Connor, who was one of those foot soldiers who was "sick and tired of being sick and tired."
5. And I am excited the people in this room, who are still on the battlefield. I know and understand via your presence this morning that you are advocates for Dr. King's dream. You are champions for civil rights for all people and you are role models for a work ethic that is the envy of all.

To you, I have come to say thank you. Thank you for the work that you have done in academic, political and social arenas. You have done a great job but America is calling upon you to do even more. Now, more than ever, the choices you make will define America's role in the world. I call upon each of you to follow Dr. King's legacy. But let us make sure that in our efforts to make America great again – that we don't make America hate again.

As a theatre teacher, I enjoyed the participation of a lot of athletes in my theatre program. But the lessons in life that I revere the most, I did not learn from our state champion baseball team. I learned them from their younger brothers and sisters who play T-Ball. Interesting thing – this T-Ball. In T-Ball, it doesn't matter if you got a uniform, doesn't matter how fast you run or if you can even hit a ball. T-Ball has one overarching principal. There is only one rule to which they aspire and it is this: Every single person on the team has to play.

This is the real legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. This is why we honor him with this national holiday – this national day of service that will showcase not only the

chances that we have to improve our lot, but a day that also highlights the choices that we make in our perpetual march toward freedom and equality for all people. The dream is not impossible but it requires ongoing commitment to achieve. Justice delayed is justice denied.

Perhaps Oprah Winfrey said it best at the Golden Globe Awards last week when she said, "A new day is on the horizon and time is up," for those who would deny the dream. Long live the legacy of MLK. Long live the dream.